

Hollywood Questions Studio's Role In 'J.F.K.'

By BERNARD WEINRAUB

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HOLLYWOOD, Dec. 23 — What is the responsibility of a studio that produces a major film depicting a huge governmentwide conspiracy in the killing of President John F. Kennedy?

With the release of Oliver Stone's movie "J.F.K.," the film community is asking about the ethical, artistic and even legal responsibility of the studio, Warner Brothers, which released the \$40 million film that asserts Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone and may not even have fired a shot in the Kennedy assassination. Instead, the movie, which opened Friday around the nation, implicates, directly and indirectly, the White House, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the United States military, big business, anti-Castro Cubans, the Dallas police force and an assortment of fringe figures in New Orleans.

Hollywood is vexed by the film, and no movie in recent years has stirred the kind of

Criticism of 'J. F. K.' has caused Warner to alter its advertising campaign. Page C7.

discussion here that "J. F. K." has. At issue is whether Warner Brothers, in helping finance and distribute the movie, adheres to Mr. Stone's provocative point of view, which has been attacked by critics in newspapers and magazines as a distortion of the facts. Or does Warner Brothers, like any studio, produce its films for one reason, to make money, brushing aside the artistic, political, moral and ethical implications of any film, including "J. F. K."? The film had the substantial involvement of the town's most powerful agency, Creative Artists Agency, representing Mr. Stone, the film's star, Kevin Costner, and numerous other actors.

Who Is Responsible for the Film's Message?

One of the top producers in Hollywood, echoing a view commonly expressed here about the film business in general, said political and ethical questions about a film like "J. F. K." were simply dwarfed by money considerations: "All these guys sit in a room, look at what a picture will cost, look at Oliver's talent and track record, look at the fact that they'll get Costner and they say, 'This is a good roll of the dice for us.' All the rest really doesn't count."

At the moment the issue confronting Hollywood is does a studio — or for that matter its parent company, Time Warner — view its role as merely giving total free rein to a prominent director and, in the process, hope to turn the movie into a financial success? Or at what point does a studio exercise its leverage and blunt the highly charged mes-

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sage of a film maker like Oliver Stone?

Warner Brothers is plainly delighted at Mr. Stone's promotion of the movie in the press, which he also attacks for accepting the report of the Warren Commission, the official investigation that concluded that Oswald acted on his own in the assassination. On the other hand, the studio was caught off guard by the firestorm over the film.

Robert A. Daly, the chairman of Warner Brothers, and Terry Semel, the president, did not respond to phone calls about the studio's responsibilities. Neither did John Schulman, the senior vice president and general counsel. But Mr. Semel told The Los Angeles Times before the film was released that when Mr. Stone made his proposal, "My immediate reaction was 'Wow! What a powerful and great idea for a movie.'"

Over the weekend, the film grossed \$5.1 million, a bit disappointing, according to exhibitors. Preliminary figures, released by the Exhibitor Relations Company, which monitors film releases for theater chains, said "J. F. K." was tied for fifth with Disney's "Beauty and the Beast." The top box-office films were Steven Spielberg's "Hook," followed by "The Father of the Bride," "The Last Boy Scout," and "Star Trek VI." Warner Brothers officials said that the three-hour length of the film diminished the number of shows at movie houses, and that audience exit polls had proved highly favorable.

Time Warner said the issue of a studio's responsibility was up to Warner Brothers. "Our operating divisions have total creative freedom," said Tod Hullin, the senior vice president for communications at Time Warner, in a statement. "This movie is a creative product and we do not interfere or comment on the results of the creative process."

'A Lot of Debate'

And Robert G. Friedman, the president of Warner Brothers advertising and publicity, said in a statement that "controversial films raise a lot of questions and stimulate a lot of debate," and "we endorse and continue to endorse the right of responsible film makers to make their ideas heard and are proud to be part of such an outstanding motion picture."

Film executives and movie makers have responded with uncertainty about the film. In the past numerous critically acclaimed films based on

fact, like "Gandhi" or "Lawrence of Arabia" or "All the President's Men," have altered fact in shaping a coherent drama. But the historical basis of the story remained intact. And few major films have, like "J.F.K.," involved such a divergence of opinion from the official record.

Dawn Steel, a former president of Columbia Pictures, said: "An artist paints a picture the way he or she sees it. Film makers are artists. But when it comes to historical accuracy there may be a moral question here. I don't know what the answer to this is. We're making fiction here, we're not making a documentary. A movie can't be judged by the same standards that journalists judge a newspaper story. It's Oliver Stone's vision. It's called freedom of speech."

Frank Price, a motion picture ex-

At issue: How much a studio should control a film, if at all.

ecutive who was also formerly a president of Columbia Pictures, said: "I don't think you as a studio have to be in agreement with the statement the artist is making. You're just backing the artist. But if a statement is one you find so unacceptable, that's where the dividing line comes. Here you're dealing with a respected film maker and you certainly give him every benefit of the doubt. Let's face it; everyone knows it's only a movie. He has actors and there's a premise. If you start to censor people's political point of view it's a real swamp."

In defense of Mr. Stone, Bert

Fields, one of the most powerful entertainment lawyers in Los Angeles, whose law firm represents the director, said: "If you are doing what purports to be a book or film about history, it's hardly rare for an author or film maker to take a position. Look at 'Richard III.' There was a violent controversy between those who believed Richard was a tyrant who murdered his two nephews. And those who think he was a wonderful king. Shakespeare represented one view, the view that was acceptable to his Queen. Nobody faulted Shakespeare. One has a right to take a view and present it as fact."

But several studio chiefs, who would speak only on condition of anonymity, said they were disturbed about the way Warner was dealing with the film. "There is a difference between Oliver Stone presenting this as truth, and the studio presenting this as truth; it's a fine line but it's there and the studio has made no differentiation," said the head of one major studio. "In this case they're not presenting it as Oliver Stone's version of the truth, as one man daring to tell his version, or something like that. They're saying, this movie is the truth. It's not irresponsible to make the movie, it's irresponsible to say, this is the truth."

Because the film deals with one of the most traumatic moments of United States history — the Kennedy assassination — some producers say the studio bears a special responsibility in releasing a movie that makes such sweeping allegations.

"The First Amendment, which is often cited in these circumstances, has nothing to do with the relationship of the studio and the film maker," said Thomas Baer, a movie producer and formerly a United States Attorney in Manhattan who was appointed by Robert F. Kennedy, then Attorney General. "It relates only to the relationship between the government and individuals. Accordingly, there is greater opportunity for stu-

dios to control film makers than there is for the government to control citizens. In this particular instance, since a living family's nightmare and a nation's torment are perceived by one person's skewed imagination, I would have hoped more control would have been exercised."

Statement of the Studio

Warner Brothers strongly defended its decision to produce the film. In its statement, the studio said in part:

"Warner Brothers takes great pride in its history of presenting serious issue-oriented drama over the years, including 'All the President's Men,' 'The Killing Fields,' 'Guilty by Suspicion' and the upcoming 'Malcolm X.'"

"We accept that controversial films raise a lot of questions and

What are the artistic and ethical implications for Warner Brothers?

stimulate a lot of debate. We believe debate is healthy. One of the most important foundations of our country is its defense of the right to free speech." Warner Brothers added that the movie "is a suspense drama that will cause audiences everywhere to ask fundamental questions about American institutions and the role that private and public citizens play in history."

"We endorse and will always continue to endorse the right of responsible film makers to make their ideas heard and we are proud to be part of such an outstanding motion picture."